

Weight Loss: Emotional Eating

Emotional eating is the practice of consuming large quantities of food -- usually "comfort" or junk foods -- in response to feelings instead of hunger. Experts estimate that 75% of overeating is caused by emotions.

Many of us learn that food can bring comfort, at least in the short-term. As a result, we often turn to food to heal emotional problems. Eating becomes a habit preventing us from learning skills that can effectively resolve our emotional distress.

Depression, boredom, loneliness, chronic anger, anxiety, frustration, stress, problems with interpersonal relationships and poor self-esteem can result in overeating and unwanted weight gain.

By identifying what triggers our eating, we can substitute more appropriate techniques to manage our emotional problems and take food and weight gain out of the equation.



How Can I Identify Eating Triggers?

Situations and emotions that trigger us to eat fall into five main categories.

- **Social. Eating when around other people.** For example, excessive eating can result from being encouraged by others to eat; eating to fit in; arguing; or feelings of inadequacy around other people.
- **Emotional.** Eating in response to boredom, stress, fatigue, tension, depression, anger, anxiety or loneliness as a way to "fill the void."
- **Situational.** Eating because the opportunity is there. For example, at a restaurant, seeing an advertisement for a particular food, passing by a bakery. Eating may also be associated with certain activities such as watching TV, going to the movies or a sporting event, etc.
- **Thoughts.** Eating as a result of negative self-worth or making excuses for eating. For example, scolding oneself for looks or a lack of will power.
- **Physiological.** Eating in response to physical cues. For example, increased hunger due to skipping meals or eating to cure headaches or other pain.

To identify what triggers excessive eating in you, keep a food diary that records what and when you eat as well as what stressors, thoughts, or emotions you identify as you eat. You should begin to identify patterns to your excessive eating fairly quickly.

How Do I Break Myself of the Habit?

Identifying eating triggers is the first step; however, this alone is not sufficient to alter eating behavior. Usually, by the time you have identified a pattern, eating in response to emotions or certain situations has become a habit. Now you have to break that habit.

Developing alternatives to eating is the second step. When you start to reach for food in response to a trigger, try one of the following activities instead.

- Read a good book or magazine or listen to music.
- Go for a walk or jog.
- Take a bubble bath.
- Do deep breathing exercises.
- Play cards or a board game.
- Talk to a friend.
- Do housework, laundry or yard work.
- Wash the car.
- Write a letter.
- Or do any other pleasurable or necessary activity until the urge to eat passes.



What if Distracting Myself Isn't Enough to Keep Me From Eating?

Sometimes simply distracting yourself from eating and developing alternative habits is not enough to manage the emotional distress that leads to excessive eating. To more effectively cope with emotional stress, try

- Relaxation exercises
- Meditation
- Individual or group counseling

These techniques address the underlying emotional problems which are causing you to binge and teach you to cope in more effective and healthier ways. For more information on these techniques, contact your doctor.

As you learn to incorporate more appropriate coping strategies and to curb excessive eating, remember to reward yourself for a job well done. We tend to repeat behaviors that have been reinforced, so reward yourself when you meet your nutrition management goals. Buy that blouse, take that vacation, or get that massage you wanted. By rewarding yourself for a job well done you increase the likelihood that you will maintain your new healthy habits.

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http://www.medicinenet.com/emotional_eating/article.htm